

Looking Forward
Romans 8:22-27
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I remember when I was a kid living in Indiana each summer my town would have a parade. It wasn't a big town, so the parade was usually just a string of fire trucks, a few Shriner cars, a clown or two, and then a line of cars who didn't realize there was a parade today and got stuck behind it. We always waved to them anyway.

One of my favorite moments was right before the parade started. We would take our seats on the curb and turn toward the direction from which we knew the parade was coming. As it approached, we couldn't see anything yet but we could hear the sirens blaring and the local high school band playing. We would crane our necks, jump up and down, stand on our chairs, say to our parents, "Do you see it yet? How about now? What about now?" We could hear the sirens; we knew it was close. But we just couldn't quite see it yet.

That anticipation is what Paul is talking about in today's passage from Romans. He says, "If we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." I don't know if my parents would say I was waiting very patiently for the parade, but we certainly had a lot of hope. And what clued us into the parade's imminent arrival were the sounds, the sirens that announced its approach.

Paul references a sound in this Romans passage, but it's not the siren of a fire truck; it's the groan of creation. "We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up until the present time." Paul is referring here to the Creation story in Genesis, when God curses Adam and Eve for their disobedience. He says to Eve, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to your children." And to Adam he says, "Cursed is the ground because of you." So in a way, the earth, the creation bore the weight of Adam and Eve's sin.

The way we have treated the earth hasn't helped matters. Now, I'm not going to tell you this morning that you need to do a better job of recycling or that you need to buy a hybrid car. Those things are helpful, but I believe what this passage leads us to is a deeper understanding of our relationship to the earth and the theological motivations that support that understanding. What do we believe about our role in relation to the earth, and why do we believe that?

I know this has been made a political issue in the last few years and folks of different party persuasions have chosen stances and sides, but I believe what Paul and other authors of the Bible are doing is reminding us that stewardship of our planet is not just a political issue. It is a spiritual issue. Therefore, we have to think about it spiritually.

I heard a speaker recently who has done a lot of work in the theology of ecology, or the spiritual understanding of how we care for the earth. His point was that when it comes to our stewardship of creation, we don't just need a change in behavior, we need a change of ethos. An ethos is an underlying sentiment that informs our behaviors and beliefs. For example, the ethos of the 80s in America was, "Greed is good." The ethos of Cubs fans is "Wait til next year!"

So what is our ethos when it comes to care for the earth? For too long, the ethos has been, "We're humans, we're awesome, and we can do whatever we want." But now we're starting to see some of the consequences of that ethos. Author Bill McKibben writes, "The story of the twentieth century was finding out just how big and powerful we were. And it turns out that we're

big and powerful as all get out. The story of the twenty-first century is going to be finding out if we can figure out ways to get smaller, to try and fit back into this planet.”

So how do we change our ethos? How do we fit back into this planet? As Christians, we turn to scripture to see what it has to say to us about this. That’s where Paul’s words are instructive. “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth.” The first thing we are called to do is to listen. What is creation telling us? What are climate changes and decreasing natural resources and rising landfills telling us? I know all of these things have political implications, but every political issue has a spiritual component, and as Christians we are called to discern what that spiritual component is, to listen to how God is speaking through it.

Paul says these groans aren’t an end, but are a means to a new birth. Nothing new is born without a struggle. Scripture references numerous times God’s promise of renewal for the earth. Listen closely to what the prophet Isaiah writes: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them,” says the LORD.

How far we are from that vision! Weeping and crying are heard constantly. Infants die; children are doomed to misfortune. Harm and destruction are everywhere. These are the groans of creation. But they point to something greater, something new being born. These sounds are the sirens that herald the coming of the parade. This is not how it was meant to be. God has promised something better, something more life-giving than what we have created here on earth.

And based on these promises, Paul calls us to have hope, but not just any hope. This is not worldly hope, which is probably more like wishful thinking. “I hope I win the lottery.” That’s not the hope Paul is talking about here. Paul means the hope that is deeply grounded in God’s promises, in God’s work in this world. And our job, all we have to do, is to wait for it.

That may seem passive to us. “God is gonna fix everything; all we have to do is sit back and wait.” I heard a story once about a woman who was on a spiritual retreat but was having a difficult time quieting herself and getting in her prayer time. She saw a monk across the way who seemed deeply still, completely at peace in the moment. Later, at dinner, she said to the monk, “I really admire the way you were able just to sit and wait and do nothing.” And the monk replied, “You assume by waiting I was doing nothing.”

The waiting Paul calls us to do in this passage is not passive waiting. It is waiting with a sense of hope, which is never passive, because hope stirs us to action to work toward that for which we hope. Being driven by hope kindles in us an ethos of active participation in making our hopes a reality. Living with hope means constantly straining forward to see with our own eyes what the sounds we hear foreshadow and then living as if that hope is a reality.

I think the tension we live with as Christians is that we have been called to intercede in this broken world, to be the change we want to see, but we don’t know how to do it. When it comes to the care of the earth, if for so long we have been part of the problem, how do we become part of the solution? Biologist E.O. Wilson said, “If all humanity disappeared, the rest of life would benefit enormously.” Well, if that’s not an option, what can we do? How can we help usher in a change of ethos that will more closely reflect our call to be stewards?

One thing is clear. We can't sit back and wait for God to fix everything we've broken. Not only did God create the world and call it good, but when God saw the mess we made of it, God sent Christ to renew and restore the world. And part of the message Christ brought to us was that we have a role to play in ushering in God's kingdom here on earth. So many times when the disciples ask Jesus for help he says, "You have the means. You have the power. You do it. Feed my sheep. Go and make disciples of all nations. You do it."

So, Paul says to us, we wait because we hope in God's promises, and while we wait, we live as if those promises are true. If God has promised we are stewards of this earth, we live like we are stewards. If God has promised that we are forgiven, we live as if we are forgiven. If God has promised to redeem creation, we live as if God will do that, treating this earth and each other with the reverence deserved of God's creations. We live with hope.

The truth of this scripture and all scripture is that the human situation is not hopeless. The crises in our lives, both personal and global, are not hopeless. Life is not a despairing wait for an inevitable end. Life is the eager anticipation of the realization of God's promises, especially the promise that death is not the end. Life is the straining to see the start of the parade. It is the perseverance through the struggle of childbirth in order to experience new life. Life is not hoping for something; it is hoping in Someone, the One who promised us redemption and called us to work for the redemption of all of God's creation. "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth." Do you hear it? Can you see it? I've seen glimpses. A kind word. An answered prayer. A stand taken for one's faith. A hope realized. Do you hear it? Can you see it? Then live it.